

## **The Self-Help Center Pilot Project of the Utah State Courts**

November 2008

### ***Background***

The Self-Help Center Pilot Project was one of the recommendations made in the July 2006 strategic plan of the Judicial Council Standing Committee on Resources for Self-Represented Parties in response to the increasing needs of the thousands of people who appear in Utah's courts each year trying to handle their cases on their own.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Overview of the Pilot Project***

The Self-Help Center (SHC) is a virtual "center" physically located in the Matheson Courthouse in Salt Lake City. It has been staffed solely by attorney Mary Jane Ciccarello since December 2007.

The SHC provides services in the Second and Eighth judicial districts. These districts were selected because they represent Utah's mix of urban and rural communities: the Second is primarily urban (Davis, Weber, and Morgan counties), while the Eighth is rural (Duchesne, Uintah, and Daggett counties). The virtual model is based on the successful Alaska Self-Help Center program which serves a population spread across vast distances in very remote communities.

People can contact the SHC via a toll-free telephone help line or by email to get legal information – not legal advice – about court procedures, paperwork, forms, referrals, what to do in court, and what to do after the court has issued an order in a case. There is no in-person contact.

The pilot project received one-time court funding in FY 2008 and FY 2009. We are now seeking legislative funding for a permanent statewide program with three full-time experienced staff attorneys.

### ***How the Self-Help Center Works***

Help line services are available 24 hours a week -- Monday through Thursday, 11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. The SHC has received more than 1500 calls and email contacts since service began in mid-December of 2007.

The range of legal questions is vast. Most calls are about family law matters, including divorce, child custody, child support, modification, enforcement, paternity, guardianship, adoption, probate, and protective orders. There are also a significant number of questions about landlord-tenant, housing, debt collection, and small claims issues. Many questions concern OCAP (the court online computer assistance program) and procedural matters. Not all questions are about matters that will wind up in court.

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<sup>1</sup> For the plan, see:

<http://www.utcourts.gov/resources/reports/Self%20Represented%20Litigants%20Strategic%20Plan%202006.pdf>

In addition to phone and email services, the SHC attorney develops ties with the local courts and community service providers, like the public libraries, senior centers, police, domestic violence shelters, and healthcare facilities. She is also involved in working toward more integrated access to the justice system with the state's non-profit legal services providers, the law schools, and the state and local bar associations.

The SHC attorney is also involved in projects to develop additional forms and resources for people representing themselves on the court's website.

### ***Data Highlights***

*December 17, 2007 – October 31, 2008*

There are three main points of data collection for the program. The SHC attorney records data about each call and email contact including the case type and zip code information. Callers and emailers are asked to complete a customer service and demographic survey, and about 10% do so. We also analyze data about the phone calls themselves, including the length and number of calls.

#### **Customer Service**

Virtually 100% of callers responding to the customer service survey say they were treated with courtesy, understand the information they received, and know what to do next. The comments are overwhelmingly positive:

Good use of tax dollars.

I am so thankful that there is a program like this that helps those of us who have no clue about the law!

It definitely gives you help when you're completely lost.

It's nice to have someone there to be able to help you for free.

Saved me a lot of money and now I know what direction to head.

She took time to explain everything. I wish it was around for my first divorce!

She was so nice and put me at ease and made it a non-panicky feeling

This is the best program I have ever ran across and thank you for helping the public so much.

You're the only person who could help me today!

The only slightly negative comments are that sometimes people have not been able to get through to the Center on their first attempt.

#### **Call and Email Data**

Data indicates that 75% were able to reach the Center on the first day they tried, close to 20% had been trying to get through for a couple of days and about 4% had been trying for a week.

The SHC receives 10-15 calls and several email messages a day. Calls are fairly constant throughout the open hours and last from a couple of minutes to 90 minutes, with the average call lasting just under 15 minutes.

For every person that is able to speak to the SHC attorney, about 3.5 calls are missed. The attorney is able to respond to 100% to email contacts and the response is usually sent the same day the original message was received.

### **Demographic Data**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Age	15% 18-24 28% 25-34 24% 35-44 15% 45-54 15% 55 and older
Annual Income	60% make \$36,000 or less
Children in Household	67% have one or more children
Education	32% High school diploma 35% Some college
Gender	66% Female 34% Male
Party Type	70% Petitioners 17% Respondents The remainder are thinking about filing, or fall into some other category
Primary Language	93% English 6% Spanish
Race or Ethnic Group	77% White 14% Hispanic 3% Asian 3% African American 1% Pacific Islander
Representation Status	95% Completely self-represented 3% Represented by an attorney 1% Partially represented by an attorney

### **Clerk's Survey**

In August of 2008 we did a one-time survey of court clerks in the pilot districts asking for their assessment of the program. The majority of respondents said that people using the SHC were better prepared, and that the existence of the SHC has made the clerks' jobs easier. An overwhelming majority felt the program should be expanded to serve all Utah courts.

### ***Project Goals***

Our main goal is to become a statewide program. The SHC would continue to be a virtual center but additional staff would allow expansion to the entire state of Utah.